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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001622

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION CARVES OUT A NEW SPACE FOR ITSELF,  
WINNING SEVERAL KEY STATES ON NOVEMBER 23

CARACAS 00001622 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: By winning five of the most populous and resource rich states in the country, the opposition opened up new political space in Venezuela. The percentage of Venezuelans with an opposition governor increased from 25 to 40 percent and voter turnout was 65 percent, well above the historical participation rate of 45 percent to 55 percent for such elections. Moreover, the opposition was able to get out its middle class support for the first time in several elections. Chavez -- who had pledged to win nothing less than all 22 gubernatorial races -- stressed in his post-election press conference that his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) 17 governorships was an indisputable victory. He pledged to respect the will of the majority and asked "Who now can say there is a dictatorship in Venezuela?" The National Electoral Council (CNE) is still tabulating the results of the 328 mayoral races, but announced already that opposition candidates won in several major cities, including Caracas, Maracaibo, and in four of Caracas' five boroughs. Embassy Caracas deployed eleven Embassy teams to monitor the elections throughout Caracas and in six states. They visited 98 voting centers and reported only scattered irregularities. End Summary.

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THE RESULTS  
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¶2. (C) Venezuelans came out to vote in unprecedented numbers for state and local elections, almost certainly due in large part to unusually high voter turnout among middle-class Venezuelans. The CNE reports that 65.4 percent of the population voted, far exceeding historical voting rates between 45 and 55 percent for state and local elections. With the addition of Carabobo State (2.3 million), Miranda State (2.7 million), and the Caracas municipality (2.1 million), approximately 40 percent of Venezuelans now live in jurisdictions governed by the opposition versus 15 percent prior to the elections. According to the first bulletin issued by the CNE, the PSUV maintained control over 17 gubernatorial seats by wide margins, excluding the close win of Chavez's brother, Adan, over PSUV dissident candidate Julio Cesar Reyes, 49.63 to 44.58 percent. Informal reports indicate that the nationwide final vote tally shows a near 50-50 split between the PSUV and opposition/dissident parties.

¶3. (C) The opposition's gubernatorial wins in Tachira and Carabobo States were comparably less decisive, with Cesar

Perez Vivas eking out a victory over the PSUV's Leonardo Salcedo, 49.54 to 48.04 percent and Henrique Salas Feo winning 47.72 percent over Mario Silva's 44.29 percent. In Miranda State, the opposition's Henrique Capriles Radonski defeated PSUV governor Diosdado Cabello by six points, 52.56 percent to 46.64 percent. Despite Chavez's frequent campaign visits to Zulia State, the opposition won the governorship with a comfortable margin, Pablo Perez receiving 53.59 percent to PSUV candidate Giancarlo Di Martino's 45.02 percent. The incumbent governor of Nueva Esparta scored the opposition's strongest win, 57.64 percent to the PSUV's 41.69 percent.

14. (C) In Caracas, the opposition's Antonio Ledezma won an upset victory in the closely contested metropolitan mayorship race, 52.45 percent to PSUV candidate Aristobulo Izturiz's 44 percent. The opposition also won the mayorships in four of the five boroughs (Sucre, Chacao, El Hatillo and Baruta). In Libertador borough, the PSUV's Jorge Rodriguez won with 53.05 percent of the vote, but opposition contender and former student leader Stalin Gonzalez doubled polling predictions by receiving 41 percent, suggesting some degree of PSUV weakness in a traditionally Chavista stronghold. The CNE has not announced the results of most mayoral races yet, but outgoing Zulia governor Manuel Rosales won the Maracaibo mayoral race. The PSUV reportedly won the Barquisimeto mayoral race.

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CHAVEZ ACCEPTS LOSSES WITH APLOMB  
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15. (SBU) Despite a pledge to win nothing less than all 22 governorships, Chavez reacted like a statesman to the news that the opposition had made several key victories. Interrupting the PSUV party leaders' post-election early

CARACAS 00001622 002.2 OF 003

morning November 24 press conference, he repeatedly held up a copy of the 1999 Constitution in front of the media, contending that "today we are consulting the people, the voice of the nation. What they say, we must recognize." After recognizing the triumph of the opposition in the Caracas mayorship and Miranda and Zulia States, Chavez asked rhetorically, "Who can say now that there is a dictatorship in Venezuela and a concentration of power in his hands?" He asked the opposition to "put its feet on the ground" and "recognize that we are and we will be respectful of the will of the majority." The President immediately added, however, that the "(electoral) map is dressed almost completely in red," that the opposition should not think that they have "overthrown" the PSUV, and that it is time to "deepen and extend" his socialist revolution. He also acknowledged that he is recuperating from bronchitis.

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EMBASSY ELECTION MONITORING  
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16. (SBU) Embassy deployed eleven informal election monitoring teams throughout Caracas and to six states. Embassy informed the MFA of this effort via diplomatic note. MFA Protocol Chief called Charge November 22 to try to discourage any Embassy informal election monitoring. Charge' pushed back and assured the MFA that Embassy teams would respect the electoral authorities at all polling stations. Embassy teams visited a total of 98 voting centers (close to one percent of all voting centers) and were invited into 78. Teams noted scattered irregularities such as malfunctioning machines, insufficient poll workers, wait times of three to five hours, and indelible ink that washed off easily. The PSUV set up tents to distribute food and drink near some polling stations, violating a ban on election day campaigning. Tupamaros, a pro-Chavez political group riding en masse on motorbikes, appeared to be discouraging opposition turnout in Merida.

¶7. (SBU) Chief among electorate complaints were slow moving lines. A number of elderly voters reported that their ballots were canceled after exceeding the maximum time limit of two three-minute voting intervals. During a 4:00 p.m. press conference, National Electoral Council (CNE) rectors stressed that polling stations would remain open until the last voter in line was able to cast their ballot. Opposition leaders complained that some 450 polling stations without waiting voters, remained open at the behest of the military in predominately Chavista neighborhoods to allow pro-government parties to try to rally more voters to the polls. Nevertheless, the opposition appears to have won the races where this occurred. All Embassy teams returned safely and without incident.

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COMMENT  
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¶8. (C) While the government won the vast majority of governorships, the opposition made noteworthy gains by winning Tachira, Carabobo, and Miranda States in addition to retaining Zulia and Nueva Esparta. Along with the Caracas mayorship, the opposition can assert local control over the most densely-populated and resource-rich states in the country. Its next challenge will be to make effective and coordinated use of this new democratic space, rather than once again succumbing to the in-fighting and personal rivalries that have hindered the opposition's political influence to date. Pundits are already warning that newly-elected opposition officials now confront tremendous challenges trying to govern some of Venezuela's most problem-ridden polities, particularly Caracas.

¶9. (C) President Chavez remains Venezuela's most popular politician and retains full control over all branches of the central government. Although the Venezuelan president has failed to achieve his outsized pledge to win all 22 governorships, his PSUV party picked up three-quarters of the governorships (17/22) and consolidated itself as the only "revolutionary" party with strength at the polls. Chavista dissidents or erstwhile partners failed to win any of the gubernatorial races, and the PSUV party may have polled as many votes as all the opposition and dissident parties combined. Nevertheless, the political landscape in Venezuela has become more pluralistic. The opposition has also learned valuable lessons for a second year in a row

CARACAS 00001622 003.2 OF 003

about getting out the vote and protecting votes cast -- opposition victories came in those states where they had the most robust presence of witnesses. With the opposition's victories and lessons learned, Chavez will now have a tougher time of it if he pursues the elimination of presidential term limits in 2009. End Comment.

CAULFIELD